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ABSTRACT

The speech/debate team at St. Mary's High School in Stockton, California, begins each competition with a prayer and does not emphasize winning trophies. Nevertheless, they consistently qualify their students at the yearly state championships. According to their coach, this is because the school has supportive and encouraging administrators and faculty who understand the real value of oral communication education. Just as all teachers should be teachers of reading, so all teachers should be teachers of oral communication skills. Teachers constantly model effective oral communication--teaching basic skills, such as speaking clearly, listening carefully, and thinking critically. Speaking skills include situations common to all classrooms, but because they are so common, teachers ignore the tremendous opportunity these situations provide to teach speaking skills directly rather than by osmosis. These skills can be grouped into five areas: affective, ritualistic, imaginative, informative, and persuasive. Classrooms also provide the opportunity to introduce and develop certain basic listening skills: listening to learn, listening to comprehend, listening to support or negate, listening to evaluate, and listening to appreciate. Some steps that teachers can take to instruct students in oral communication are: (1) know what is to be taught; (2) be gentle; (3) be realistic; (4) be creative; and (5) be affirming. Even if a required speech course is not possible, teachers can provide students with opportunities to become articulate, comfortable, and practiced in the skills of oral communication. (NKA)

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INTEGRATING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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PRAYER: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and whatever God was, the Word was. And the Word became human. We have been gifted with words, and challenged to speak well. Let us speak faithfully, hopefully and lovingly. May the Word of God live within us so that the words we speak may bring God to others, and others to God.

That's the prayer with which my speech/debate team opens every meeting and begins every competition. I am, as the chairperson pointed out, the Director of Forensics at St. Mary's High School in Stockton, California. That's a fancy title for speech and debate coach. My team meets after school on Tuesday afternoons and practices in the evenings four days a week. Well, to be honest, most of the team members meet after school on Tuesday afternoons, and some of them practice in the evenings maybe once a week. I'm not what you would call a demanding coach. I don't put an emphasis on winning trophies or medals.

Nevertheless, St. Mary's High School has qualified students to the State Speech/Debate Championships every year since 1981 and to the National Forensic League Championships for the past decade in events as

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diverse as Team Debate, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Congress Debate, Original Oratory, Expository, Original Prose, Original Poetry, Dramatic Interpretation, Humorous Interpretation, Thematic Interpretation, Oratorical Interpretation, National and International Extemporaneous Speaking, and Impromptu -- and St. Mary's High School has had finalists or semi-finalists in half those events.

Notice that I said "St. Mary's High School" has qualified students. You have to understand: I don't teach a class in speech or debate. Forensics is a co-curricular activity at St. Mary's. So, why the success? Because I am fortunate to work with an administration and faculty who are supportive, encouraging, and who understand the real value of oral communication education. My students are successful because they come to me with the basics. I just give them a chance to show off.

Some facts to ponder:

- Adults spend 75% of their day engaged in communication. Of that,

  46% is devoted to listening;

  30% is devoted to speaking;

  10% is devoted to reading;

  9% is devoted to writing.

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- Adults spend 1/3 of all working time carrying on face-to-face conversations with individuals or in groups.
- Corporate managers spend 60% of their time in oral communication.
- 25% of the nation's young people cannot adequately communicate orally.
- 62.5% of young people cannot explain how to get to a local grocery store so that another can understand the directions.
- The vast majority of world cultures continue to use oral communication as the principal method for conveying understanding from one generation to the next.
- In adult life, a person is at least three times more likely to exchange meaningful information with others by speaking than by writing.
- Nevertheless, according to a Gallup Poll of some years ago, the 2nd greatest fear among American adults is the fear of dying in a plane crash. The greatest fear is speaking in public. Which merely means that more people would rather die in a plane crash than give a speech.

How many of you are among that number? How many of you find that your palms get sweaty, your knees begin to tremble, your mouth goes dry and your mind wanders aimlessly in a fog when you are called upon to give

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some sort of talk to a group of adults? How many of you would like to spare your students that same anxiety?

The title of my presentation is "Oral Communications Across the Curriculum". Actually, I had a longer title, but for some reason "A Gift of the Spirit is the Gift of Tongues: Integrating Oral Communication Skills in Your Classroom Curriculum" wouldn't fit in the program. And I have a disclaimer: nothing can take the place of a well-planned course in the fundamentals of oral communication. This workshop is meant to supplement, not supplant, the required speech class; my goal is to encourage you to support, not replace, the professional speech teacher. But I also know that not every high school requires students to take a class in speech, and that not every high school even offers a class in speech. Therefore, I believe it is necessary that <u>every</u> teacher in <u>every</u> classroom be prepared to assist our students in achieving some measure of competence in oral communication skills.

How many of you are math teachers? Science teachers? PE teachers? Social studies or English teachers? Are there any elementary or junior high teachers? For you English teachers, I'd like to start with an observation by Gilbert Highert, a noted literary critic whom I must confess I had never heard of before I pulled out my Bartlett's Quotations:

"Books are not lumps of lifeless paper but minds alive on the shelves. From each of them goes out its own voice ... and just as the touch of a button on your stereo set will fill the room with music, so by taking down one of these volumes, and opening it, one can call into range the voice of a person far distant in time and space, and hear it speaking to us, mind to mind, heart to heart."

So we should emphasize reading, right? We should have bigger and better libraries, right? Our children should buy books instead of video games, right?

Well, yes. But that's not the point. Listen again to that opening statement: "it's own voice ... the voice of a person ... hear it speaking ..."

Just as all teachers are -- or should be -- teachers of reading, so all teachers are -- or should be -- teachers of oral communication skills. You are constantly modeling effective oral communication, but it is important that students should practice what you teach. This can be done in any subject area, and that's what I hope to convince you of today.

So: what are Oral Communication Skills? Let's begin with the negative enthos: let's consider what they are not.

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ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

1. What Oral Communication Skills are not:

   a. public speaking, ie. "giving a speech"

   b. oral reports, ie. reading aloud a written assignment

   c. memorization/recitation

   d. acting or role playing

These are all techniques or results or methods -- they do not comprise all of oral communication.

2. What Oral Communication Skills are: Basic, Natural and Necessary.

   a. basic skills -- speaking clearly, listening carefully and thinking critically are the building blocks upon which all education rests.

What does it mean to "speak clearly"? Surely, this is not a skill which can be taught in a classroom setting. After all, practically anyone over the age of five can speak clearly right? Obviously, Teen-glish is not spoken in your school. Like, you know what I mean? For sure. My students rarely use the all-purpose "like" because they know that I will interrupt them mid-sentence and ask, "Do you mean similar to but not actually?"

I think that we must pay as much attention to a student's speaking habits as we do to a student's writing habits. How many of

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us would accept a homework assignment which looks like the dog just chewed on it, or a term paper from someone who desperately needs SpellCheck, or a short story on torn and crumpled paper? We correct errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation; we insist on neatness as a sign of respect for the reader; we provide opportunities for students to be exposed to different writing styles and literary genres in the hopes that they, too, will learn to write as well. We must do no less with oral language and oral composition.

Speaking skills include situations common to all classrooms, but because they are common we ignore the tremendous opportunity they provide to teach speaking skills directly rather than by osmosis. They can be grouped into five areas:

- affective: the expression of feelings/opinions (eg, personal attitude about a school rule; "Hey, this dress code stinks!")
- ritualistic: expressions of polite behavior/social courtesies (eg, conducting a conversation; "Yo, bro! What's happenin' dude?")
- imaginative: creative expression (eg, rôle-playing; "And so my mother goes into this outrageous fit, man, and tells me I'm grounded for life!")

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- informative: giving and receiving information, including directions, descriptions and explanations (eg, "So, dude, you can get killer pizza at the Hut on the Avenue--just go down two blocks and hang a left; it's on the corner.")
- persuasive: messages which intend to influence attitudes, beliefs or behaviors (eg, advertising; "Hey, Molly! I've got the keys to my dad's Mercedes! How about goin' to the prom with me?")

Every classroom also provides the opportunity to introduce and develop certain basic listening skills. There are a number of esoteric studies in this area, but any good television addict knows that listening skills can be grouped into five categories:

- listening to learn (what I call Dragnet listening: "just the facts, ma'am")
- listening to comprehend (every soap opera asks the question: what do you really mean?)
- listening to support (or negate) an argument (the Perry Mason approach)
- listening to evaluate (the Judge Wapner method)
- listening to appreciate (PBS, MTV, the Nashville Sound).

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OK, it sounds like I'm poking fun -- but the point is this: If it can be taught subliminally on tv, it can be taught directly in the classroom. We merely must become aware that we are teaching listening skills so that we can do a better job of it.

b. natural skills -- all human beings have an innate desire and need to communicate, but effective communication must be developed through proper instruction and practice. Too often this is neglected because we assume that just because a child can talk s/he can communicate.

But haven't we all faced a student who prefers to give up in conversation with the all-purpose disclaimer "I don't know what I mean" when what that student really lacks is not knowledge but the communication skill to share that knowledge. And what about the shy student or aggressive student, neither of whom has learned appropriate ways of sharing their interests and needs and therefore is cut off from others by frustration and anxiety.

One of the principals I work with has an effective method of dealing with students who are "experiencing interpersonal difficulties": she sits them down with pencil and paper and has them write out their version of the situation -- and then each must read

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the other's version aloud. It's amazing how this simple exercise gets a conversation started between two people who never bothered to listen to each other before. No, it doesn't always work -- and it always requires an adult referee -- but it's a first step in impressing a student that conflicts can be solved through communication, and that effective communication takes work.

c. necessary skills -- in order to participate in our democratic society, a citizen needs the ability to comprehend, analyze and respond to political discussions. In order to be successful in any business or job, a person must be able to communicate effectively with the public and with fellow workers.

How do we as classroom teachers address these necessary oral communication skills? I would suggest that we tend to do so unconsciously. We put students together in groups or teams for cooperative work; we ask students to exercise leadership in clubs or service organizations; we negotiate homework assignments and grade scales. What we don't always do is provide students with the prior instruction required to make these social/political moments work.

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Rather than focus on the end-product of a group assignment, it might be better to evaluate the process which the students use to reach their goal. Make sure that a rubric for that evaluation has been provided and agreed upon beforehand -- and make sure that rubric includes a section on oral communication skills.

In club meetings, provide instruction and practice in specific parliamentary procedures, require oral reports from officers, insist that the president use good management skills in directing a discussion or debate. And do your students -- and yourself -- a favor: provide them with an evaluation of their success. You'll find that meetings proceed much more smoothly.

d. Gospel skills -- we are called to proclaim God's word and we are challenged to "teach as Jesus did". We should remember that Jesus was a teacher in the oral tradition and that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the gift of tongues -- which merely means that effective communication is personal communication. It's not enough to have students lead classroom prayer, or read aloud from Scripture, or participate at Mass as a lector. It's not enough, but it's a beginning. Students must also be given the tools they need to share with others the Gospel message on a day-to-day basis, in

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ordinary circumstances. This is not to say that you should train your students to be street-corner preachers -- but they should be prepared to explain their Faith clearly, to defend their moral choices openly, and to listen to others patiently and lovingly.

3. Steps to instruction in oral communication.

   a. Know what you want to teach: First of all, remember that oral communication more than just speaking -- it is also listening and thinking. Consider the various stages or segments of oral communication. For example, if your goal is that a chid will be able to speak in front of the class without mumbling, don't worry about memorization or "body language".

   b. Be gentle: Speaking in front of peers is one of the most anxiety-producing tasks a person can have. Ease your students into the various skills-building activities; allow them to use any necessary "crutches" (notes, lectern, sitting at a desk like a "news anchor", even standing at the back of the room and narrating a slide show) as they slowly develop confidence.

   c. Be realistic: Not every person is destined to be a great orator, or even a very good one -- but all students can learn to speak clearly, to listen carefully, and to think critically. Let your students know

that it is ok to feel nervous or to make a mistake. Unfortunately, the good models they have on television (like news anchors) also seem to be "perfect", but my favorite comment on television performance is "Reality is in the out-takes." Remind your students that "bloopers" are reality.

d. Be creative: Provide a variety of opportunities to practice oral communication skills. Class reports don't have to be boring recitations -- visit the past or a piece of literature with a television talk-show host; stage a telephone conversation between scientists engaged in research; don't provide a written copy of a poem and have students develop a collage based on your reading of it.

e. Be affirming. For some painfully shy students, any attempt is a success. For all students, learning oral communication skills is a process which needs support and encouragement.

More than ever, ours is an information society. We are inundated and surrounded by messages from various media. We all are producers and consumers of communication. That is why communication skills are fundamental skills for success today ... and in the future. I believe that the integration of oral communication skills across the curriculum is

necessary if our students are to be adequately prepared for life beyond high school but such integration should be seen as supplementary to the ideal. The ideal, of course, would be to provide our students with a separate, required class in oral communication. After all, math used in a class does not replace a class in math; reference to scientific theories in social studies does not guarantee an understanding of the scientific process. Systematic instruction by a teacher formally prepared in discipline creates the conditions for success by application of both theory and practice of acquired skills. Until the day comes when every student enrolls in Speech I, however, and especially after they leave that class, all of us must be prepared to provide our students with every opportunity to become articulate, comfortable and practiced in the skills of oral communication.

Like, for sure.